

Nebraskans can be especially proud that agriculture remains a bright spot in America's economy. The work of our farmers, ranchers, and other agricultural producers is essential not only to food security, but also to conservation, energy policy, and even national security.

Over recent months, though, a serious concern has arisen regarding the way in which the federal government is monitoring some farmers and ranchers. It's a concern some livestock feeders have shared with me directly.

Over the past year, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has been sending "eyes in the sky" over livestock operations in Nebraska and surrounding states. As has been reported in numerous media accounts over the past few days, the EPA in some cases uses aircraft to observe and photograph cattle feedlots.

My Nebraska colleagues - Senators Mike Johanns and Ben Nelson and Representatives Lee Terry and Adrian Smith – and I recently asked EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson to explain these actions. We asked for answers as to why the EPA feels compelled to employ such tactics and how regularly and in what manner the flyovers occur. We have yet to receive a direct response. Acknowledging the "over-flights," the EPA has argued their use is a cost-effective means of ensuring compliance with the Clean Water Act. It stated that no fines are issued based on the direct surveillance. Still, my colleagues and I remain concerned about the violations of farmers' and ranchers' civil liberties, and we seek a fuller explanation of the statutory authority under which the EPA believes it can conduct these flights.

While it is certainly important to ensure the protection and safety of our water and other natural resources, this type of intrusive surveillance is a serious concern for many Americans, particularly those in rural areas. There are still many questions: How does this federal agency choose who is subject to this surveillance? Is surveillance strictly limited to compliance with the Clean Water Act? What happens to the photos and videos of these good citizens and their property afterward? There are many privacy-related questions that the EPA should answer. And I believe rural Americans deserve to know.

For the full text of our inquiry to the EPA, please [click here](#).